

Cinecoup & The Art Of Yes: A Grade Nine Story

When I first heard about the Cinecoup Film Accelerator, I was hesitant. My screenplay wasn't done, and on paper, the workload looked nearly impossible. I guess it was one part timing, and one part fascination with the potential of the program, that led me to throw caution to the wind and go for it.

I had recently been examining the successes of some of my peers, and had isolated a single factor that seemed to be at the core of their approach, that in my view, was a huge contributing factor to their professional and creative growth. The word YES seemed to me, to be their secret. For better or worse, they almost always said YES when it came to collaborations, unpaid or otherwise, in their fields of expertise. Like a good improv actor working with another performer, "yes" was the answer to every offer. It was with this small, but powerful revelation in mind, that I charged ahead.

I decided to go ahead and take a crack at finishing my feature length screenplay called "Grade Nine". It had an earlier life as a short screenplay and was one of the few pieces of my writing that had made it past my extremely discerning story editor, Toby Gorman. When I showed Toby and Seth the initial draft of the feature, they said YES, without missing a beat.

The three of us had been living the film lifestyle for many years. Between us and our contacts we had most aspects of production covered out of the gate. The one essential missing component to our puzzle was young talent. All of the craft in the world would not compensate for the fact that in order to bring Grade Nine to life, we would need a wide host of talented young performers. We reached out to casting directors across the city, but no one would bite. We didn't have time for maybes to become yeses. We began an online blitz, sending out our casting call on Facebook, Craigslist and to every agent's email we could get ahold of. We had a small "in" with an elementary school and followed that lead all the way to Templeton High, where we would eventually find the talent to fill one of our most critical roles. We were polite and professional in our pursuit, but we knew this was a make or break factor. We were relentless.

We poured through applicants, and then it began to happen, one by one they appeared. It was such an amazing learning curve. We felt so empowered. We were reaping a harvest we had earned. We didn't wait for people to get back to us. We considered every silence and "no", and kept moving forward. When finally we had assembled an insanely awesome young cast, we knew that it was our "piss & vinegar" that had made it happen. I'll never forget sitting in Seth's car after a 14 hour day on set, reviewing an audition that I couldn't

attend, watching Mackie, light up the screen and claim the role of Jodi Reid.

Filming the trailer for Grade Nine was such an amazing experience. It was the perfect culmination of all of our collective filmmaking experiences. So many talented professionals came out. The community support was really humbling. Folks seemed to really get what we were trying to do, and wanted to see us succeed. It was all so cohesive. We shot exactly what I had written, and our extremely ambitious two day shoot went off without a hitch.

We knew we had captured some excellent material, but when we started cutting the footage, it soon became apparent that we had actually done it. We had captured the spirit of the words on the page. Grade Nine had come to life. That was a huge victory in itself.

We were actually kind of shocked when we won the Fan Favourite in the first week. We knew we liked Grade Nine, but what a heartening experience it was, after so many years of grinding away, keeping the dream alive, to have such a wide public endorsement of our work. Another huge YES.

Then came the real work. I don't think anyone was really prepared for the reality of what it was going to take to create quality content each and every week, with very few financial resources and while juggling our regular lives. When the gravity of what we had signed up for had sunk in, we rolled up our sleeves, and committed to the process. It was hard on everyone, especially our families - but we all believed in our project - we wanted a shot bad enough, so we all said YES.

The immediate feedback every Monday was so amazing. Week after week, a tide of positive comments would fill our mission pages. We had an audience. Having perfect strangers weigh in and enjoy our work was so inspiring. Having a real fan base pushed us to work even harder.

Even though we were doing well, we knew we could never coast. This was our shot at showcasing what we could do, and we were going to seize every opportunity to do so. Whenever we were busting our asses and scrambling, we knew we were doing something right. We tested the limits of our relative capabilities every week. We fought hard, and it paid off. We were proud of our work.

We have so many people to thank for helping us make it through this crazy experience. Firstly our families, without their endless patience and enthusiastic support, we would simply be dead in the water. We are so fortunate to have access to such a talented crew. We did our best to respect the time and efforts of folks who helped, attempting to cycle them and use their time efficiently. Whenever we needed a hand, there was always someone to lend it. Then there is our cast. Those amazing young people who are so committed to this project. They are all so sharp and professional, so attentive and willing to take direction. They always bring their A game. They always say YES.

As tough as this process was, it has been such an empowering experience. The pressure of the extremely tight production window forced us to be resourceful and decisive. Relying on our wits, creativity and production savvy, we were able to produce content that we were proud of. We have tested ourselves on so many levels. We have learned, that together as team, we are capable of even more than we had suspected. We have learned that it is time to believe in ourselves.

As we close the door on this chapter of our creative journey, we look back on this experience fondly, knowing that we have no regrets. Knowing that we gave it our all. Knowing that under extreme duress, we rose to the challenge and created material we are proud of. We know this ending is much more of a beginning, and now more than ever, we know the power of the word YES.

Thanks for watching,

Jay Rathore
owlbearproductions@gmail.com